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WHITE HOUSE FOR NSC BADER, BANGKOK FOR RDMA BERGER

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TAGS: EAID SENV AS

SUBJECT: VICTORIA WILDFIRES: CANBERRA UPDATE

REF: A. MELBOURNE 20

1B. MELBOURNE 21

1C. CANBERRA 134

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Daniel A. Clune, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

11. (SBU) Summary: Though the worst of the fires appear to be over, Australia is reeling as rescuers discover more victims from Victoria's wildfires, with the death toll expected to pass 200 (ref B). Deputy PM Gillard termed the fires "one of the darkest days" in Australia's peacetime history. The President's call to Prime Minister Rudd received considerable positive attention, with Rudd referring to it in Parliament. Victoria has yet to make a formal request for U.S. assistance, but we understand that Departments of Interior and Agriculture are ready to act as soon as Victoria finalizes its request. The focus continues to be on fighting the remaining fires and supporting victims, but there are now calls for comprehensive reviews of policy, and unprecedented investigations into how the fires started and were handled. End Summary.

PRESIDENT'S CALL WELL RECEIVED

12. (SBU) PM Rudd, back in Canberra after touring Victoria over the past two days, expressed national condolences in Parliament and referred in very positive terms to his January 10 conversation with the President, in which the President reiterated the offer of USG assistance to Victoria.

13. (SBU) In addition to the President's call, Rudd said that Australia received offers of financial or material assistance from the following countries: France, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Singapore. UK Prime Minister Brown, European Commission President Barroso, UN Secretary General Ban, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, all offered expressions of support, as have Pakistan, Brazil, Cuba, Nauru and Andorra.

14. (C) We continue to work closely with National Interagency Fire Center Deputy Director Bodie Shaw (ref A) to formalize Victoria's request for U.S. firefighting assistance. Victoria's Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) indicated late in the day on February 10 that they wanted to consider their resource needs overnight, but we expect a finalized request on the morning of February 11. We are monitoring that situation closely to ensure that U.S. assistance will be put in place in a timely manner.

POLICY REVIEW AND ARSON INVESTIGATION

15. (C) Experts have already begun to analyze why the fires caused so many deaths and whether the "shelter in place" policy guidance was correct. Gary Morgan, CEO of the Bushfire Cooperative Research Center, told MDRO on February 8 that anyone who died in their vehicles "was not following the policy." Morgan noted that instead of sheltering in place, many initially decided to stay, then tried to flee at the last minute as the scale of the fires became clear. Many were then killed in their vehicles as country roads were blocked by debris and smoke. Morgan said the stay and defend policy was developed over a period of decades following the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires, and was based on sound experience and science about what is best to do in a bushfire situation. While sobered by the death toll, Morgan was confident that Q While sobered by the death toll, Morgan was confident that the crisis would result in a new surge in federal funding for fire research. He also said, however, that his Center's funding had not been renewed for next year.

16. (SBU) Analysis of the fire sources has been colored by a suspicion that many of the dozens of major fires over the weekend were set deliberately. PM Rudd said that anyone who was determined to have been involved in arson would be considered a "mass murderer." Victoria Police Commissions Christine Nixon declared all fire sites crime scenes and Victorian detective ranks were being bolstered by police forces from other states. Investigations into the sources of the fires are predicted to take up to a year, with the recognition that the extreme nature of many of the fires will make a determination of the causes difficult.

17. (C) The fires will add impetus to efforts to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the federal government. Both Morgan and Tony Bartlett, General Manager for Finance and Community Grants at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) said that the current federal arrangements have long been criticized, as the fire response role is currently split between three agencies in Canberra. Bartlett said that the initial emergency response, including coordinating release of federal military assets, sits with Emergency Management Australia. The fire prevention policy for the forestry and agricultural industries sits in DAFF, and the environmental management role sits with Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. Bartlett said that the government had been trying to develop a unified national bushfire policy since the 2003 fires that devastated Canberra, but the process had been in a "long gestation as there is no one driving it here." The Victorian fires, with their shocking death toll (for comparison, the 2003 fires killed four people) would add new impetus to clearing up the tangled undergrowth in federal fire policy, Bartlett said.

MEDIA SUMMARY

18. (SBU) The fires have dominated the local and national sections in newspapers across the country with extensive reports and photography the last two days. News and current affairs programs have sent crews to the affected areas. Many programs have extended their on-air broadcast times to cover events as they occur. Reports that a team of U.S. wildfire specialists would be coming to assist was quickly picked up by several media outlets, including the national Australian newspaper and Sky News. News that the President had called Prime Minister Rudd was also widely reported. However, with the volume of domestic human interest stories and messages of condolence from other governments (of the UK and New Zealand among others), the U.S. response has received comparatively minimal coverage.

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